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# TOUR

NORTHWEST MONTANA'S  
TOBACCO PLAINS

# Tobacco Plains Tour

When the last glacier retreated from the Tobacco Plains over 18,000 years ago, it left behind a unique landscape attractive to people and wildlife. Herds of elk roamed freely, and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse danced to the rhythm of the coming spring. For centuries Native Americans camped here, dug bitterroots, and cultivated tobacco. Canadian explorer David Thompson passed through here in 1808, followed by other explorers, miners, ranchers and homesteaders attracted to this scenic valley, first known as "the Big Village of the Sanka Indians".

Almost 200 years later, the Tobacco Plains is still haven to unique wildlife, plant life, and people, many of whom wish to conserve the natural and historic treasures found here. Come along and see for yourselves the beauty and history of our valley.



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## The Eureka Lumber Company



### #1 The Eureka Lumber Company

(Start Here - Set Mileage Counter to Zero)

The large flat area where the peaceful Historic Village stands today was once astir with the hustle and bustle of one of the largest lumber mills in Montana. Begun in 1905 as the Bader and Bottom sawmill, it changed ownership 3 times, suffered three major fires and numerous strikes during its short life. A disastrous fire in 1906 nearly destroyed the mill and town, but both were rebuilt. The company employed over 300 workers to cut and drive the timber to the Eureka mill during its peak years. During the spring river drive, logs jammed the Tobacco River for 25 miles upstream! Half the townspeople were left without a livelihood when the company abandoned the town in 1924.



### #2 Indian Creek Settlers

(2.7 miles)

Native American people camped along the deep, bubbling springs of Indian Creek until the 1890's. They grew tobacco and burned off the thick willow bottoms to raise hay for their ponies. Prospectors passing through on their way to the Wild Horse gold diggings in Canada were so charmed with the setting, they vowed to return. In 1864 Thomas Ferguson did return, ambitious with his plans to transform Indian Creek Flats into a "fine big stock ranch". The "69" Ranch, as it was known, traded hands several times, becoming a central meeting place as more and more ranchers brought their families to the lands around Indian Creek. By the 1890's, this small community named "Tobacco" had a school, hotel, blacksmith, saloon, store, and regular (once a week) mail delivery.

### #3 Finishing Touches

(4 and 6.5 miles)

Glaciers, when they finally receded about 18,000 years ago, added the finishing touch to the Tobacco Plains country in the peculiar hills you see all around you. The flowing ice molded deep deposits of assorted gravel and rocks into streamlined forms called *drumlins*. Covering long stretches of the valley floor, drumlins provide relief to what was once a wide empty plain. These are the only large drumlin fields in Montana. From the air they suggest schools of giant tadpoles all lined up with their heads facing north in the direction of the receding glacier.

### #4 Bitterroot Blossoms

(10 miles)

In early June the foothills and prairies of the Tobacco Plains are painted colorful hues of pink and white; these are blossoms of the bitterroot, our state flower. For centuries, Native American people held ceremonies in early May to ensure a large harvest of this valued root crop. Only women dug the bitterroot, using a special, fire-hardened, willow stick. After peeling and washing the nutritious roots, women discarded the inner "heart", the part responsible for much of the bitter taste. Used like flour for thickening stews, or boiled with powdered camas bulbs for a sweet treat, these luxury foods offered variety to an otherwise meaty diet.



### #5 Dancing Prairie

(12.9 miles)

Springtime on the Tobacco Plains is a symphony of color and sound: warbling meadowlarks, delicate, purple pasque flowers, and the fluttering dance of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse. In 1987, the Nature Conservancy began acquiring land here to preserve the last known dancing grounds in Montana for this unique bird. Native plants, like the rare Spalding's catchfly also find refuge here, as much as the prairie is subdivided and developed. You are welcome to walk here from late May through February. The entrance kiosk is located 1 mile south on Airport Road.



## **#6 Living Heritage**

(13 miles)

Timber cuts visible on the mountains in front of you are reminders of the importance of timber harvesting to the spirit and economy of the local community. Even before the 1900's there were already several small mills on the plains producing lumber for local use. Later, many local men made logging their business, supplying ties for the new railroads, as well as lumber for settlements and mining timbers. Most of the families in this valley are still linked to timber harvesting in one way or another. The surrounding National Forest lands help to sustain a community tied to the land, supporting an ever-increasing national demand for lumber.



## **#7 Iowa Flats**

(16.8 miles)

Shortly after the Great Northern Railroad built railroad lines into the Tobacco Valley in 1903, groups of emigrants came west from Iowa in boxcars, and chose to homestead in this area. In the beginning summers were cool and rainy, but the first hot, dry summer, crops burned up and the hopes of Tobacco Plains being a second Iowa began to fade. The sandy soils were nothing like rich Iowa topsoil. Cool summer nights so grand for sleeping, slowed the growth of crops. Although some of the original homesteaders returned to Iowa, many moved to other parts of the Tobacco Valley and raised large families, many of whom are still here today.



## **#8 Sophie--Packer, Trader, Adventurer, Friend**

(18.6 miles)

Many of the original pioneers who made the Tobacco Plains their home rest here in the Eureka cemetery. One of the valley's favorites is Sophie Morigeau, born to an Indian woman and a Hudson's Bay trader in 1835. Sophie moved to Tobacco Plains in the 1880's. This adventurous woman assembled a pack string and ran trade goods from Missoula, Montana and Walla Walla, Washington to Fort Steele in Canada, in the days before women were even seen in the Tobacco Plains. Sophie also ran a trading post and built up large herds of cattle and horses. Although she struggled all her life because of her mixed blood, Sophie had many friends, both white and Native American. Her independence, industriousness, fortitude and graciousness are qualities we all admire.

## **#9 Saturday Socials at Mills' Spring**

(21 miles)

Around 1896, a rival to the settlement of Tobacco, Mills' Spring, sprung up here on little Spring Creek. Mr. Mills first put up a hotel, ranch buildings and corrals, followed by a store and before long, a school house. Other homesteaders joined in to build a church and Woodman Hall, which became a community center. Lively Saturday night dances attracted folks for miles around, a bright spot in the daily drudgery of pioneer life. Young and old alike kicked up their heels to square dances, waltzes, the polka, and even the Highland fling! At midnight, sawhorses and panels turned the dance floor into a dining hall as everyone feasted on sumptuous potluck dishes. Afterwards, tables were cleared and dancing resumed until dawn!



## **#10 The Big Ditch**

(21.6 miles)

The ditch you just crossed was constructed back in 1914 as part of a grandiose scheme to bring water from the foothills to the parched prairie. Enthusiastic farmers invested in the dream of converting the Plains into lush pastures. So confident they were that the water would bring them increased prosperity, they mortgaged their lands to build fine houses before they even saw a drop of water. Disastrously, farmers found the gravel subsoil drained the irrigation water like a sieve. Many of them lost everything when in 1920 the Glen Lake Irrigation Company went broke. Remains of the big ditch, with its many flumes and siphons, can be seen all across the prairie. Parts of it are still in use today, after additional water was siphoned from Grave Creek more than 10 miles away!

## ***#11 Christmas Tree Capitol of the World***

(24 miles)

If you were to pass through here in late October or November you might notice truckloads of bundled green trees winding their way down out of the foothill areas towards town. These are Douglas-fir Christmas trees, cut from forests on private and National Forest land. Each year during the 1930's and 1940's, Eureka shipped several hundred railcars of the country's finest type of Christmas tree to markets all over the U.S. Although no longer the largest supplier of Christmas trees, during the late fall this area still bustles with Christmas tree-harvesting, bough-gathering, and wreath-making, supplying Christmas greenery across the country.



## ***#12 The Old West Place***

(24.5 miles)

Originally known as the "Mountain View Ranch", the old West ranch is now called "Willow Fire Ranch". The Wests spent years of hard work clearing land of dense timber, heavy brush and stubborn roots, and raising their seven children. This family, as others, survived on what they could grow: grain, hay, potatoes, cows, chickens, and hogs. Many of the original buildings still stand: the ice house, milk house, hog barn and original house with additions.



## ***#13 Meadow Home Dairy***

(27.1 miles)

The handsome barn nestled here among rolling hills was once home to Eureka's first dairy. Built in 1924, every board was measured and cut with a handsaw. It sheltered up to 31 Holstein cows at a time, and the many children who played and worked there feeding, milking, and mucking out the great barn. Horsewoman Terecia Lebeau Purdy started the Meadow Home Dairy back in 1908. For over 60 years the Purdy family supplied milk to the town of Eureka, delivering by milk wagon until 1937 when the horse ran away with the wagon once too often. Replacing the broken milk jars became too costly, and the family decided to buy a second-hand truck! The family still farms here, but replaced the dairy cows with beef cattle in the 1970's.





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